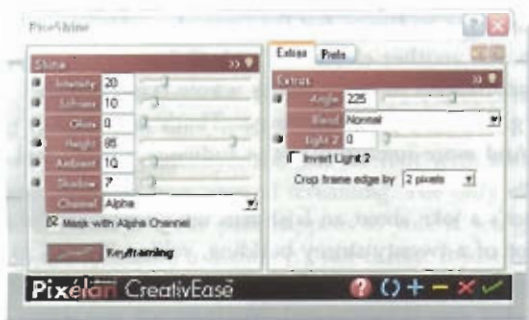


Pixelan CreativEase Spice Filters

Pixelan has created a solid reputation for producing high-quality video transitions and effects. Its SpiceMaster series includes a vast range of options, all customisable and keyframeable and offering an extremely subtle and 'organic' look and feel. David Smith explores its latest offering, CreativEase.



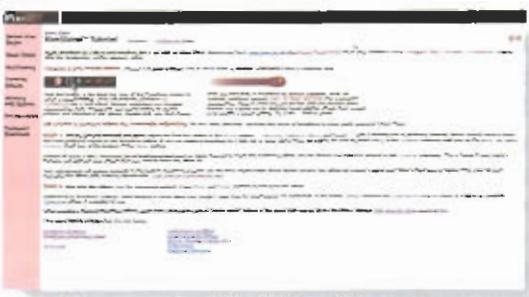
Some options for Rise-Shine filter.



Main control panel for CreativEase.



CreativEase on the Vegas timeline.



Tutorial screen for Rise-Shine filter.

Features

As Michael Fereer from Pixelan Software puts it: CreativEase "is handy for everyday editing problem-solving. Selectively sharpen/soften parts of a video image (without tedious masking) such as to remove facial blemishes or to create beautiful dreamy looks. Create colour-accurate smooth-edged animation/cartoon looks directly from video. Produce true glossy/shiny 3-D titles. Add subtle filmic styles and film grains; crop edge noise without stretching/bordering the image. And more".

He's right. This is a very useful software package. The complete effects pack contains five sets of effects, plus a very useful tool called CleanCrop. Given all the control options for each effect pack, and given that they're all keyframeable, customisable and savable, this represents a huge array of options that can be applied to video, graphics, animations and titles.

The CleanCrop tool, for example, allows you to remove edge noise or distortion from video clips without having to resort to the Pan-Crop tool. The result is a remarkably clean video with no edge distortions but one which retains its original sharpness and clarity.

The Pixelan Mixer

An immensely powerful feature of all Pixelan filters is the Mixer control. Unlike simple fades or dissolves, the Mixer allows you to base transitions or effects on any one of a range of criteria, such as luminance, chrominance, and alpha channel. This produces film-like transitions that seem to emerge from a particular colour or brightness, adding interest and atmosphere.

Thus, by applying a CreativEase blur or sharpen filter to an image of a face, you can use elements of the image itself—such as the whites of an eye—to shape the filter dynamically. The sharpening will automatically be applied to just the areas you select, based on the mixer settings. There are so many possibilities that you just have to download the trial version and mess around for yourself.

Installation

Installation is totally straightforward; for either the trial or purchased versions, just download the 6MB executable file and double-click. Follow the prompts and when you open Vegas (or Premiere Pro, Avid or Media Studio Pro) you'll find a whole range of new options under your video FX tab.

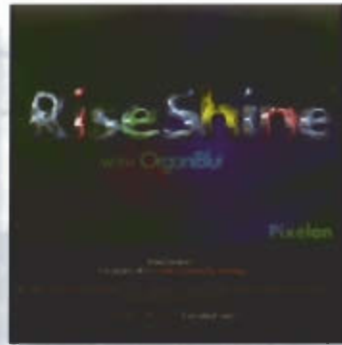
There are several important things to bear in mind when you use Pixelan plug-ins for the first time.

- Within each effect, the first option should be selected. There are many other options available, but the full power of the software is only available when you apply this top-left filter.
- (Vegas users only) When the Pixelan control window opens, you should Uncheck the Sync Cursor button. This sounds strange, but the Pixelan keyframer is more powerful than the Vegas one, so you must disconnect Vegas' internal sync.
- Choose a preset effect by clicking on the blue circular arrows in the Pixelan toolbar. A preset preview shows in the window to the right. Click Open, then always click the green tick to apply the effect.

Starting with presets is a great way to access some of the vast range of



Detail of Rise-Shine filter in action.



Rise-Shine plus Organiblur filters combined.



Just one example of FlowTexture 2.



Example of text with ChromaWarp filter applied.

possibilities offered by these plug-ins. In fact you may never need to use anything but the presets, there are so many available. But if you need to build that extra special super-powerful glowing/reflecting/sparkling image then just get working on all those buttons and sliders until you get what you want.

Animating effects using Bezier keyframes is simple and powerful—simply press the Keyframing button in the control panel and away you go. If you're familiar with keyframing concepts, the Pixelan interface is self-explanatory. If you're new to keyframing, I suggest you work through the various tutorials to get your head around how they work. Also check out the video demos in the help section (activated by going to Start>All Programs>Pixelan>CreativEase>Help)

I have to say Pixelan's implementation of keyframe animation is one of the most intuitive and reliable I've encountered. Anyone who has tackled Boris Red or After Effects will know how complex it can become. Not so here, thankfully.

Performance

CreativEase performs flawlessly on even a modest computer (eg. P4 1.6 GHz 512 MB RAM). On a video workstation (eg. P4 3 GHz+ 2 GB RAM+) it really shines. In the Vegas version reviewed here, you can use Vegas' loop preview function to tweak settings in realtime: add a CE Spice to an event, double-click the event and it will loop continuously while you make adjustments to any controls you like. The changes are previewed in realtime. When you find a suite of settings you like, just name and save them for future use. As with the SpiceMaster series, multiple CreativEase effects can be applied to a given event and several instances of the same effect can also be applied with interesting results.

Documentation

One of Pixelan's strengths is its documentation and support. A brief Getting Started file gives you the basics but each of the main features of CreativEase is covered in a tutorial section which gives clear examples of what each effect can achieve, a short tutorial exercise to get you going, and a section called Controls in Detail. This online document can be linked to the Web so you have access to larger sample images and even short explanatory videos. This online documentation covers a range of topics as shown in Figure 1.

Notice that you'll have to adapt to Pixelan's spelling regime—the "e" in its name is an é and all of the company's filters have no space between the words. Thus creative ease becomes CreativEase, and the filters become Organiblur, BlurPro, RiseShine etc.

Value for Money

At the special offer price of US\$129 for the complete set of 11 filters, CreativEase represents excellent value for money. The results look superb and are easy to achieve, and there's a vast array of possibilities included in the pack. Compared with the price of Boris Red or After Effects, CreativEase is a steal!

Help Functions

In addition to the Tutorial Guides referred to above, CreativEase includes context-specific help files that are accessed via the round "?" button on the base of the CreativEase control panel. This opens a new Help window that offers comprehensive step-by-step instructions for that specific effect.

The help files are very comprehensive, multi-page documents that include basic help, tips and tricks, tutorials and advanced issues. They are well written and do seem to address issues properly

and provide useful solutions to problems you may encounter.

Pixelan is committed to "providing superb support". Emails will be replied to promptly, usually within a few hours. I tested this claim and it was true. Contact www.pixelan.com/help/techsupport.htm •

CreativEase
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Three clicks to alter text—animation with lighting shifts is easy.

We Liked

- Ease of use, stability, low cost
- Especially liked the fact that these effects have a different look and feel to other commonly used effects packages, so your videos look fresh and original

We Didn't Like

- A possibly-Vegas issue which appeared to cause crashes when undoing
- Otherwise, nothing to dislike.

Contact

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Price: US\$39 per pack (two effects).
Special Offer: US\$129 for the complete set, plus some giveaways